



Region One
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

WEST VALLEY DONATED PUBLIC ACCESS EASEMENT &
PROPOSED WILDLIFE VIEWING AREA
DECISION NOTICE
MARCH 16, 2018

Description of the Proposed Action

The West Valley area north of Kalispell is the only migratory staging area for sandhill cranes in northwest Montana. It also serves as critical migratory habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, and raptors. Although the area provides year-round wildlife-related recreational opportunities, such as wildlife watching and photography, the public must view wildlife from narrow county roads since there are no designated areas for wildlife viewing.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposed to accept a donated ¼-acre public access easement to create a wildlife viewing area that meets the grade and dimensional standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act and provides the public with a safe area for wildlife viewing and outdoor educational opportunities. The easement would provide access to incredible wildlife viewing opportunities not currently available elsewhere in the valley, as well as provide an outdoor classroom for the local schools.

FWP proposes to accept Alternative B, the proposed action of the West Valley Donated Public Access Easement and Proposed Wildlife Viewing Area draft environmental assessment (EA).

Public Involvement

The West Valley Donated Public Access Easement and Proposed Wildlife Viewing Area draft EA was released for a 14-day public comment period on February 27, 2018. FWP posted a public notice on its webpage (<http://fwp.mt.gov>) and the Region One Facebook page. A news release was prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region One issues, and the draft EA was available at FWP Region One Headquarters in Kalispell and the FWP State Headquarters in Helena. Additionally, public were notified with notices in the *Daily Inter Lake* and the *Flathead Beacon*. Notice of this EA was also distributed on cards to neighboring landowners to ensure their knowledge of the proposed action.

Summary of Public Responses

FWP received 15 responses to the draft EA. All responses were positive in nature and supported the proposed action. Many of the responses acknowledged the level of community involvement and assistance in reaching fundraising goals. One response offered suggestions to mitigate wildlife

disturbance. One response, while supporting the project, expressed concerns over the potential increase in traffic and potential impacts to adjacent neighbors and residents beyond the public access easement.

FWP Responses to Public Comments

1. **Wildlife disturbance suggestion:** One letter expressed concern over the number of people and the effect it may have on wildlife. It was suggested that blinds or screening be put in place to mitigate disturbance.

FWP Response: On page 10 of the draft EA, we stated that “while there will be an increase in human use of the viewing area that could stress wildlife, the proposed site has been placed at a distance to minimize any disturbance to wildlife species using the pothole wetland.” The distance of the viewing area from the viewing area to the closest wetland edge is more than 300 feet and is greater than the flush distances in response to walking reported in peer-reviewed literature for most of the species expected to use the pond and surrounding agricultural fields.

2. **Potential increase in traffic:** One letter commented that this project will bring more traffic to the area.

FWP Response: Given that the West Valley is already a well-known birding area currently being advertised on multiple websites and by the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce, we do not anticipate a dramatic increase in traffic. The tourism report on page 20 of the EA states that “the West Valley area is an important asset for nonresident visitors and Montana resident visitors seeking scenic drives, bird watching, and photographic experiences. It is featured on the Kalispell Visitor’s Center birding map and brochure which is distributed in printed and electronic versions.” The link to the document is http://www.discoverkalispell.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/FlatheadValley_Birding_Broch-Map.pdf.

3. **Adjacent neighbors and residents:** One letter asked generally about adjacent neighbors and residents at the end of the road.

FWP Response: In addition to public notices in local newspapers, the FWP website, and the Region One FWP Facebook page, notice of this EA was distributed on cards via the U.S. Postal Service to neighboring landowners to ensure their knowledge of the proposed action. No individual responded that identified themselves as neighbors or residents with specific concerns. FWP will work closely with the landowners and residents during construction to minimize any inconveniences. When complete, the site will only have space for 4 vehicles at the viewing area at one time. Signs will be placed to clearly delineate access easement boundaries. Also, as stated on page 14 (10f.) of the EA, “FWP, subject to funding availability, will maintain the access road, parking areas, trails, fences, signs, and other improvements on the easement. Maintenance of these improvements does not include plowing or mowing. FWP will collaborate with the landowner on the control of weeds on the easement based on usage. Flathead Land Trust has raised \$5,000 to assist FWP with the cost of maintenance.”

FWP Final Decision

In reviewing all the public comments and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, I hereby approve Alternative B, the proposed action of the West Valley Donated Public Access Easement and Proposed Wildlife Viewing Area draft EA.

Through the public review process described above, FWP found no significant impacts associated with the proposed action. Noting and including the responses to public comments, FWP will recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve Alternative B, the proposed action. FWP believes the completion of this project will help accommodate the increasing demands for safe and easily accessible wildlife viewing opportunities, for all ages, northwest of Kalispell and allow FWP to foster interest and involvement in the resources we manage, while conserving the agricultural values of the West Valley.



Neil Anderson
Wildlife Program Manager

3/16/18

Date

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